

What is alcohol poisoning?

Alcohol poisoning is a serious - and sometimes deadly - consequence of consuming large amounts of alcohol in a short period of time. Drinking too much too quickly can affect your breathing, heart rate, gag reflex and potentially lead to coma and death. A person with alcohol poisoning needs immediate medical attention.

Treatment consists of providing breathing support and intravenous fluids and vitamins until the alcohol is completely eliminated from the body.

Symptoms

- Confusion, stupor
- Vomiting
- Seizures
- Slow breathing (less than eight breaths a minute)
- Irregular breathing
- Blue-tinged skin or pale skin
- Low body temperature (hypothermia)
- Unconsciousness ("passing out")

It's not necessary for all of these symptoms to be present before you seek help. A person who is unconscious or can't be roused is at risk of dying.

When to see a doctor

If you suspect that someone has alcohol poisoning — even if you don't see the classic signs and symptoms — seek immediate medical care.

How much is too much?

Unlike food, which can take hours to digest, alcohol is absorbed quickly by your body — long before most other nutrients. If you drink on an empty stomach, about 20 percent of the alcohol is absorbed directly from your stomach and can reach your brain in less than a minute.

Most alcohol, though, is processed by your liver. It takes about one hour for your liver to process (metabolize) the alcohol in one drink — defined as 12 ounces of beer, 4 to 5 ounces of wine or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits.

The rate at which alcohol is processed can vary considerably from person to person. In general, though, drinking more than one drink an hour gives your liver more than it can handle. Binge drinking — usually defined as rapidly downing five drinks or more in a row — is especially dangerous. Drinking large quantities of alcohol so quickly means that you can consume a lethal dose before you pass out.

Source: Mayo Clinic staff